

CISMONT SCHOOL  
Louisa Road  
Keswick  
Albemarle County  
Virginia

HABS No. VA-1377-A

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA  
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C St. NW  
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## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

### CISMONT SCHOOL

HABS No. VA-1377

Location: Louisa Road, Keswick, Albemarle County, Virginia.

Cismont School sits in an open field to the east of State Route 231 (Louisa Road). The property is bounded by mature trees on all sides. The present owner currently lives on the site in a mid twentieth-century residence located southwest of the schoolhouse.

Present Owner: Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Spicer, Jr.

Present Use: Vacant.

Significance: Used as an Albemarle County Public School from 1908 to 1961, Cismont School was the first high school in the Village of Cismont. The 4.5 acre tract of land was originally sold by W.W. Johnson to the School Board of Rivanna District No. 1 of the county for \$209 on 18 September 1907. As stated in the original deed delivered to Principal A.L. Everett on 14 April 1908, "it is understood and agreed that said tract of land shall be used for the establishment and running of a public school for white children exclusively."<sup>1</sup> Cismont is an example of a rural school in Virginia impacted by segregation. It represents the improvement of educational facilities for the white community with the provision of a library, three main classrooms, an auditorium, an athletic field, stables, and every necessary outbuilding. Going beyond just an educational facility, the Cismont School provided an arena for community involvement through the sponsorship of many events outside of school activities.

Historian(s): Amanda B. Davis, Gretchen A. Hilyard, Lauren M. MacDonald, Elizabeth H. Moore, Cora M. Palmer, Catherine H. Redfearn, and Anh K. Thai, May 2004.

#### PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

##### A. Physical History

1. Date: ca. May 1908.
2. Architect: Not known.
3. Original and subsequent owners: School Board of Rivanna District No. 1 of the

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<sup>1</sup>Albemarle County Deed Book 137/10-11.

County of Albemarle, Virginia (1908-61); Mr. and Mrs. Thomas E. Spicer, Sr., assumed the land on 14 December 1961; Thomas E. Spicer, Jr., received title from his parents.

4. Builder, etc.: Not known.
5. Original plans and construction: Unavailable.
6. Alterations and additions: Storage facilities and a connecting breezeway were added to the rear of the school in the 1920s. Paneling on the interior has been altered and interior fireplaces have been eliminated; the fireplace locations have been obscured by later alterations to the building fabric. Electricity was added. The original bell tower was removed sometime before 1961. Also before 1961, a window on the northern facade of the dressing room (classroom four) was converted to a door leading to a small balcony.

#### B. Historical Context

Initially, Cismont School was constructed as a response to the conditions of rural schooling in the segregated South. Over time the innovation of the school was diminished as social changes, as well as its size and location, rendered it unable to meet the community's needs. Discontinued as a school in 1961, its abandonment signaled a shift to larger, centrally located public schools and the building became obsolete.

### PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

#### A. General Statement

Cismont School is an example of a rural school in central Virginia dating to the early twentieth century.

1. Architectural character: The building's vernacular character is evident in its white-washed clapboard siding and balloon framing, as well as other materials similar to those used in domestic and other, small structures of the period.
2. Condition of fabric: Multiple structural failures are apparent in the roofing, flooring, foundation, and walls. Demolition is pending.

#### B. Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: 55'11 1/4" (east to west) x 47'3 1/2" (north to south), 33'3" high.
2. Foundations: The foundation is 2' high in most places; it is a mix of concrete, brick and field stone.
3. Walls: White-washed clapboard, measuring approximately 5" in width and varying in length, covers the balloon framing on the exterior.
4. Structural system: Balloon framing.

5. Porches: One inset exterior porch covering 3/4 of the north (front) elevation.
6. Chimneys: Two exterior brick chimneys flank the building on the east and west.
7. Openings
  - a. Doorways and doors: There are four exterior doors on the first floor and three on the second leading to small balconies.
  - b. Windows and shutters: There are twenty-two windows on the first floor comprised of double hung sash glazed with two-over-two lights and one triple casement window glazed with eighteen lights. The second floor fenestration consists of eleven double hung windows glazed with six-over-six lights.
8. Roof
  - a. Shape, covering: Cross-gabled standing seam, hipped roof of sheeted metal.
  - b. Cornice, eaves: 1' eaves with cornice line following the roof line.
  - c. Dormers, cupolas, towers: There are three dormer windows, one on the north elevation and two on the west elevation. There are no cupolas and the bell tower is no longer extant.

#### C. Description of Interior

1. Floor plans: The first floor consists of two rooms on either side of a central passage running north to south. There are three classrooms, a library, and stairway leading from the central passage to the upstairs. The second floor consists of a large auditorium with a stage covering the western side of the building and a dressing room/classroom on the northeastern portion.
2. Stairways: One stairway leads from the entryway to the rear of the auditorium.
3. Flooring: wood plank
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls contain lath and plaster in-fill and are covered with small slat wood paneling which runs vertically up to the chair rail and horizontally above that to the ceiling. Sheetrock was added later.
5. Openings
  - a. Doorways and doors: There are seven interior doors on the first floor, and one on the second.
  - b. Windows: There is one interior window on the first floor located between the hall and classroom three.
6. Decorative features and trim: Simplified classical moldings surround the windows and doors. The interior doors are four-panel models; a chair rail runs around the interior on the first and second floors.
7. Hardware: Machine nails and standard door knobs, locks, and hinges abound.
8. Mechanical equipment:
  - a. Heating, air-conditioning, ventilation: Although not air-conditioned, heating and ventilation systems have been added.
  - b. Lighting: Electric lights were added after construction, but no longer work.

c. Plumbing: There are no interior lavatories.

### PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

#### A. Early Views

Photographs of the building were published in the newspaper; see *Times-Dispatch* (3 May 1908)

#### B. Bibliography

Albemarle County Deed Book, 137/10-11, 375/328-29, 389/70-71.

Everett, A.L. "Cismont Now has Fine High School." *Times-Dispatch* (3 May 1908).

#### C. Supplemental Material

Copies of historic photographs from the Albemarle County Historical Society; field photographs, 13 February 2004.

### PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The documentation of Cismont School took place as part of Louis Nelson's (2004) field methods class at the University of Virginia, School of Architecture, Department of Architectural History. Students recorded various structures through measured drawings and written description; the record the students created was dependent on their ability to read what the structure was telling them about its construction history rather than on traditional documentary research.